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ABSTRACT

Ten teachers who had experienced two and three decades of classroom teaching were interviewed to determine what stages their careers had passed through and how their attitudes had changed over the years. The teaching careers of these individuals were characterized by early job mobility, high satisfaction in the first decade followed by restlessness and a feeling of crisis as retirement approached. Their personal attitudes toward discipline gradually changed. They altered their teaching methods over the years and became more flexible in dealing with students. As they matured they achieved a more positive rapport with students and a more relaxed confidence. (JD)

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# MIDDLE-AGED EXPERIENCED TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR CAREER DEVELOPMENT

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There is a segment of America's teaching force which is middle-aged and has logged two and three decades of classroom teaching. These teachers started during a teacher shortage and have witnessed the post-Sputnik curriculum boom, the liberalism of the 1960's, and the teacher surplus and back-to-basics trend of the 1970's. In their personal lives they have moved through young adulthood into middle age. They have within them a vast accumulation of experience peculiar to their era, age and occupation. How have these middle-aged experienced teachers developed? What is their view of their life work?

The occupation of teaching has been characterized as "unstaged" (Lortie, p. 82); there is little opportunity for advancement in the usual sense. While a few teachers become educational administrators, the majority either remain in the classroom or leave the occupation. It is not yet clear what are the effects on teachers of two and three decades in this unstaged occupation. Do classroom teachers somehow stage their careers, or is each school year a repeated cycle? In popular phraseology the question is: Has the teacher had twenty-five years of experience or one year of experience twenty-five times? The purpose of this exploratory study (Newman 1978) was to determine some middle-aged teachers' perceptions of their own career development.

Using qualitative methodology, the investigator interviewed ten middle-aged public school teachers about their career development. The teachers were selected through a network of the investigator's colleagues; they were male and female, black and white, from urban, suburban and rural schools, teaching on the elementary, junior and senior high school levels. They ranged in school teaching experience from nineteen to thirty-one years.

The data were collected in two indepth interviews of each teacher. Each pair of interviews consisted of two parts. In the first, unstructured part the teacher gave an account of his or her career. In the second, semistructured

part the teacher was questioned about aspects of a teaching career: decision to enter teaching, work history, changes in self and teaching, and perceptions of the changing profession.

Two types of data analysis were conducted. In order to convey a holistic portrait of each teacher, a 2000-word professional biography was written of each teacher. Then the teachers were analyzed as a group in areas derived from the interview data and from related literature: how teachers mentally structure their careers, including work history, satisfaction, and perceptions of the changing era; the teaching self, including decision to enter teaching, teacher education, first year of teaching, reaching maturity, long-range changes, and plans for the future; related aspects of professional life, including non-school-time duties, inservice education, and membership in professional organizations.

Tentative Stages of a Teaching Career

From the teachers' accounts emerged several tentative stages of teacher career development: their professional energies, their commitment and their satisfaction had changed over the years.

The early years of most of the teachers were spent moving from school to school, grade to grade, and/or subject to subject. They changed school systems for a more desirable community in which to settle down, for the opportunity to do graduate study at a nearby university, or in a relocation following a spouse's new position. They switched levels and subjects either to get out of teaching situations in which they were unhappy or when asked by an administrator to fill another open position; they found they enjoyed this new level or subject and decided to stay with it.

> After three years in Hinton, my wife and I decided to move back to our college town to raise the kids. We have lived and taught here ever since, and it has been a very good town for us. The opening here was for head track coach, which

> is what I was really interested in, and junior high science and math. I had done my teacher training in physical education, history and government, but when they needed a math teacher, I discovered that I liked teaching math extremely well. I went back to school and got my math degree so I could continue teaching it.

The first decade was a time of high satisfaction for most of the teachers. Listening to their career stories one senses their enthusiasm for the new job and their increasing confidence with the realization that they were learning and succeeding. They felt they reached maturity during this time. Any dissatisfactions were attributed to the particular school situation, not to the occupation of teaching itself.

These early years were also a time of reconsideration of the decision to have a teaching career. The teachers considered entering business, school administration or college teaching; they stayed in school teaching because the work seemed more personally rewarding or because the occupational conditions were more favorable. Women who had taken time off to start families returned to teaching. The decision to teach was reaffirmed by the teachers by their early thirties.

> I decided to go for a master's degree in educational administration. I came to Columbus to teach and to get my master's at the same time. I finished the degree, but after talking with my principal friends, I changed my mind about going into administration. It wasn't worth the hassle.

By the time the teachers were in their midthirties, most had settled into a stable position in a particular school system and school, teaching the desired subjects at the preferred grade level. There they were to remain until the point at which, after thirty years of service, they could consider retirement. It was a time of continuing their effective teaching, experiencing the ups and downs of unique years and classes, updating certain aspects of their teaching, and adjusting to the changing times.

At a point in their early forties a majority of the teachers experienced a drop in satisfaction with teaching. It is possible that the decrease was an indication of midlife stress. However, none of the teachers attributed the decrease to his or her own aging process; furthermore, most of the teachers were in their early forties during the turbulent period of the late 1960's.

Closely related to the drop in satisfaction was a realization by several teachers that they were "getting in a rut"; they made changes in schools and/or grade levels to revitalize themselves.

> After ten years at Marshall Junior High, I realized that I was one of the few original teachers remaining. The others had gone on to be principals or high school teachers or to get married. I began to wonder what was wrong with me. Everyone else seemed more successful. So I asked for a transfer to a new school which would open the following fall. I was hoping for the same kind of rebirth I had experienced when I came to Marshall.

A majority of the teachers, at some time between their early forties and early fifties had temporarily refused to join the teachers' organizations. They were disgusted with the state and national associations becoming more like unions in their tolerance of strikes, support of political candidates, and control over their members. The teachers were distressed by how the teacher's image in society had changed since they had begun their careers. Their withdrawal from membership coincided with a dip in association membership at the local, state and national levels. After a few years out, the teachers rejoined for protection and to show support for fellow teachers.

As the teachers drew near the point at which, after thirty years of service, they could retire without sacrificing benefits, they seemed to face a crisis in deciding whether to retire. The decision was complex; several sources of inner turmoil were evident. Some wished to retire but could not afford it financially. Several felt sorry that teaching was not what it used

to be in many ways. Some, while currently not very satisfied, felt that they did not regret a career spent teaching.

> When I started teaching, I had six classes with about forty-three in each class. If I had not been young I could not have handled it. Today I have only twenty-seven in each class and only five classes, and I am shot by the end of the day. So the load is about half, but the kids are so different that it takes every bit of energy to keep them in line, keep them going and keep them responding. I've enjoyed teaching up to this point. I'm really tired this year.

Only two teachers had felt long-term high satisfaction with teaching, had definite plans for the future, and felt no ambivalence about these plans. Some teachers still enjoyed teaching but felt the pull between the desire to teach and the desire to pursue other interests.

> I'm at the point now where I try to think about retiring. I'm hoping that we can work out a schedule for me to teach only three days a week next year. I hate to give up teaching, but I'm getting a little jealous of the time I have to spend here when there are some other things I want to do. Three days a week will allow me a little more time for some of the hobbies I want to do. I'm not sure I'll be satisfied not teaching. I happen to enjoy teaching.

Long-term Professional Development

The teachers also described the major changes they had noticed in themselves: they had altered their teaching methods; they had become more flexible in dealing with students and had developed a more positive rapport with them; they realized they no longer had the drive and energy of their youth.

Most of the teachers had made changes in their teaching methods. Some said their methods were changing constantly, depending on their students' needs. Others indicated that while the basic approach had not changed, they were always looking for ways to update their examples. Several teachers had fundamentally altered their teaching methods: they had become more creative or more lively or had moved in the direction of greater individualization or increased student

involvement. A junior high science teacher explained her professional Copernican revolution:

> The more I am used to my subject matter, the less afraid I am to do something new. When I first taught science, I was afraid to do experiments. I thought they wouldn't turn out right. Then I started doing experiments, but I did them. I figured I was lucky if I came out right, let alone the kids. Now I do none of the experiments, except the one where you explode sodium on water. So I have moved toward more student participation. Going back for my master's degree (at age 47!) gave me more background in subject matter, which meant I could spend more time thinking of things the youngsters could do.

Most of the teachers found that over the years they had become more flexible in dealing with students. They found themselves accepting the same student behavior which they once would have punished. The change had come about largely because, according to the teachers, young people today are simply less well behaved than the youth of twenty and thirty years ago. The teachers characterized today's children as more nervous, unsettled, and feeling sorry for themselves. While today's youth have more worldly knowledge than formerly, they do not know how to handle this knowledge; maturity comes later. For some of the teachers the move away from being a strict disciplinarian proved difficult; it involved a major philosophical reorientation and a reluctant acceptance of society's changing expectations of schools. The adjustment was personal as well as professional; the teachers had to cope with their own intolerance of the students' changing behavior. As one elementary teacher put it,

> Teaching styles have changed so much. I used to say, "You don't do this or that." That's all different now. Kids get out of their seats whenever they want to, within reason. They do a lot of little things that kids didn't do ten years ago. When I ask a question a child might have a smart remark. I think it was very hard for me to make the change and to conduct my class in a completely different fashion. I was talking to my husband about it one evening, and he said, "You're used to saying 'jump' and the kids say 'how high?' and they are not doing that any more." From then on I just had to have a discussion with myself: "If I am going to teach, I'll just have to be more flexible."

The teachers saw long-term changes in the nature of their rapport with students. They mentioned an increasing ability to get along with young people, and found themselves more understanding of young people's problems. This less formal relationship had been fostered in part by the changing era. Whereas teachers used to be held on a pedestal by the community, now they must first prove themselves as individuals in order to gain respect. Although contemporary teachers are consequently subject to more criticism, many of them have also reaped benefits by having a closer and more relaxed relationship with students.

> During the time I started teaching, teachers were very formal; teachers were supposed to act in a certain way and do certain things. You were just kind of a robot. Now I'm more relaxed; I'm more myself. The kids see more of me.... I'm still a disciplinarian, but I'm more relaxed.

Other teachers viewed their own increasing age and personal maturity as facilitating their more personal relationships with students. A high school Spanish teacher explained the development this way:

> I've always been relaxed and gotten along well with my kids. I do not have discipline problems, and I never have had. I suppose I don't take it all as seriously as I did when I first started. Back then I might get angry about some of their excuses, but after years of experience there is nothing new. You can just look at them and smile. I'm a little more wry about it, and in some cases more understanding.

Most of the teachers acknowledged being more tired or less energetic than they used to be. They attributed the change either to a loss of their youthful enthusiasm or to weariness brought on by the new standards of behavior of today's youth. One elementary teacher described the change:

> I don't have the energy to give to teaching which I used to. It is certainly easier now for me to teach the things I like than it used to be when I started. I used to spin my wheels, so to speak; when I worked the hardest, I wasn't accomplishing any more than I am today. Of course, I still think about school; I plan mentally for it. But I just don't spend the time in planning and grading that I once did.

The teachers found themselves either putting less time into professional life or finding that their efforts were more tiring.

Conclusion

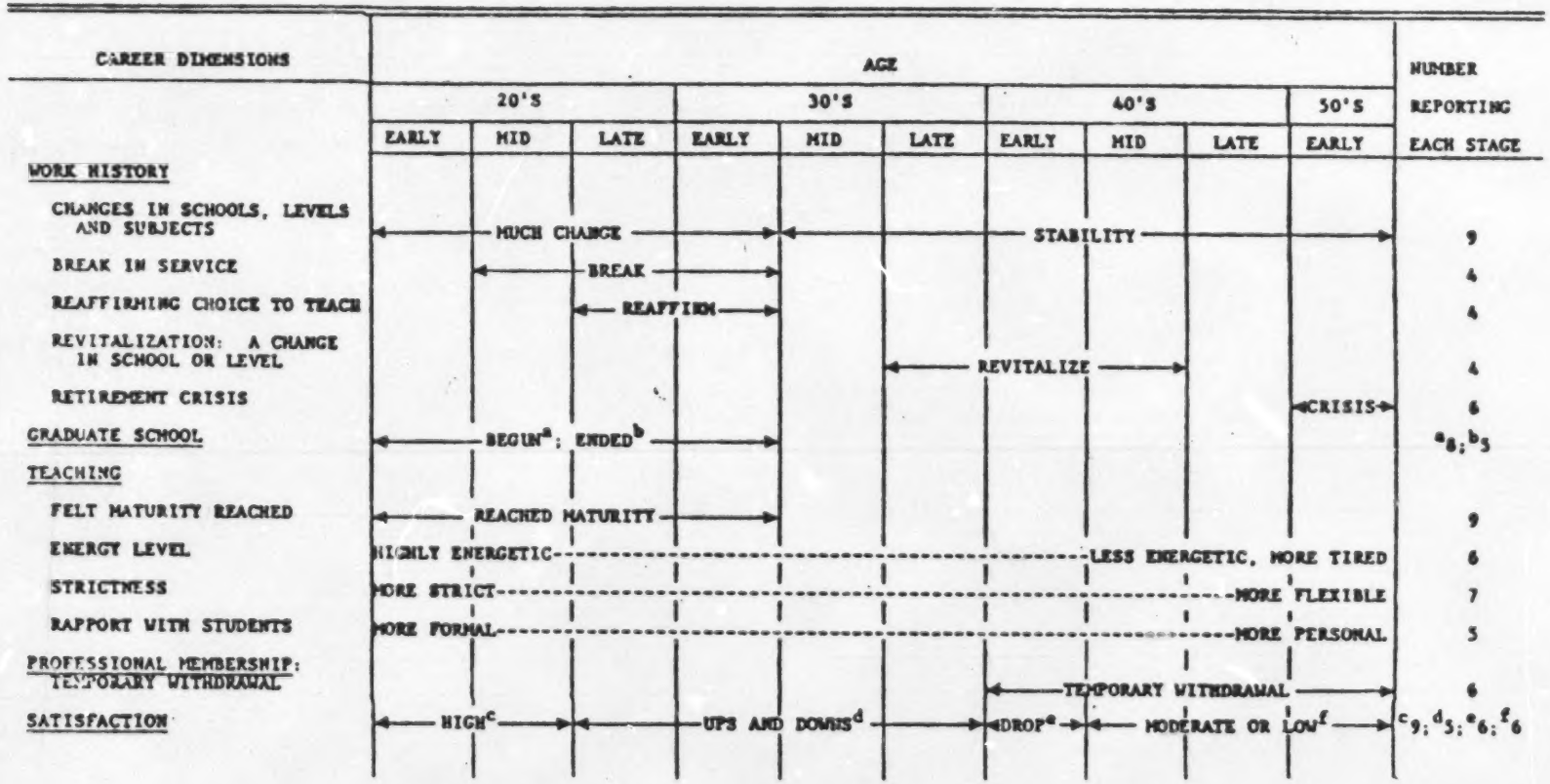
Whether these stages of career development (summarized in the attached table) are common to teachers of other ages and other eras has yet to be determined. What is more significant is the concept of stages within a teaching career. While stages have been posited for the process of learning to teach, the notion of development in career teaching is just beginning to receive serious attention.

There are three auspicious directions for future research in this area. First it is necessary to see whether the ten teachers' stages are applicable to the experiences of other career teachers. Further studies will delineate. refine and fully describe the stages.

A second course of research would compare teacher career stages to the stages of adult development currently emerging from such investigators as Gould (1972) and Levinson et al. (1978). An understanding of changing goals and perspectives throughout adult life will undoubtedly illuminate the professional development of teachers.

Last, the structure of the teaching career needs to be compared to those of other "unstaged" occupations. To what extent are the changing perspectives of career teachers parallel to those of other occupations in which people occupy the same position for decades? Answers to these questions will have significant implications for teachers in their understanding of their own careers, and for all educators concerned with the ongoing revitalization of American education.

## SUMMARY OF TEN TEACHERS' STAGES OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT



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